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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002302

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SUBJECT: DEATH OF SHIA LEADER ABD AL-AZIZ AL-HAKIM

REF: BAGHDAD 000380

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Gray A. Grappo for reasons
1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Shia political world marked a major milestone with the death today of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, the chairman of the influential Shia party the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Hakim's death could herald a generational shift within ISCI and the Hakim dynasty that could bring to the surface competing visions among the leadership for ISCI's future. Abd al-Aziz's 37-year-old son, Ammar, is the likely successor, but he may find his authorities constrained by the party's old guard. Hakim's chief of staff, Haitham al-Husseini, told Poloff that a delegation will retrieve Hakim's remains and bring it to Iraq for burial; mourning ceremonies will be held in Baghdad and the Shia holy city of Najaf. Post is developing plans for the Ambassador intends to extend condolences in ceremonies in Baghdad or Najaf. END SUMMARY.

Death of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in Tehran

¶2. (U) Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, born 1950 in Najaf, Iraq, was the youngest child of the prominent Iraqi cleric Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim. He was also the brother of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, founder of ISCI and close U.S. partner against Saddam Hussein; Mahammad Baqir was murdered in Najaf in 2003. Since being diagnosed with lung cancer in May 2007, Abd al-Aziz had groomed his eldest son, Ammar (born 1971), as his successor. In the Iraqi press today, Sunni and Shia figures offered condolences and praise; many emphasized that ISCI has faith in Ammar's leadership.

Hakim's Legacy: Integration into the New Iraq...

¶3. (C) After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim led the transformation of the well-disciplined, well-funded, and Iranian-origin Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its associated militia, the Badr Corps, into Iraqi political parties. This process led to a partnership with the United States and other entities to build the new Iraqi state. Before 2003, SCIRI and Badr fought the Ba'th regime from Iran, often through violence and subterfuge. Between 2003 and 2005, Abd al-Aziz encouraged SCIRI to participate in writing the Iraqi Constitution and Badr to fold itself into the New Iraqi Army. (Note: In contrast, Muqtada al-Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi initiated an open revolt against Coalition Forces and the Iraqi government. End Note.)

¶4. (C) As the Maliki government took shape in early 2006, Abd al-Aziz was selected as the Council of Representative (COR) bloc leader for the Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the umbrella Shia party that captured the most seats in the COR. In December 2006, President Bush received Abd al-Aziz at the White House. In 2007, SCIRI removed the word "revolutionary" from its name to signify its acceptance of Iraq's new order. Badr Corps -- no longer wishing to emphasize its militancy --

largely integrated itself into the Iraqi security forces through Coalition Provincial Authority Order 91, and became a political party, the Badr Organization. ISCI switched its official religious object of emulation from Iranian Supreme Leader Ali al-Khamenei to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most popular cleric among Iraqi Shia today.

15. (C) During the January 2009 provincial elections, Hakim's ISCI performed worse than expected, losing its dominance in provincial governments in southern Iraq. With minor protest, Abd al-Aziz and others in ISCI accepted the results and facilitated the peaceful transfer of power in the provinces to a coalition led by PM Maliki. However, in his last meeting with a U.S. official, Abd al-Aziz complained bitterly that a U.S.-funded television station unfairly attacked ISCI during the campaign (ref A).

...But Linked with Iran

16. (C) Despite attempts to alter his image, Hakim never shed criticism that he was influenced by (or a pawn of) Tehran, a liability among Iraq's Sunnis and an increasingly nationalistic Shia electorate. His death in Iran will reinforce this image. Many of our contacts still offer vague complaints that, through ISCI and Badr, Iran has fingers in Iraq's ministries and security forces. For example, Hakim's call for a nine-province southern region to consolidate Shia local authority was seen by his detractors as an Iranian plot to cleave Iraq. Hakim rarely criticized Tehran's Iraq policy and would brush aside our private inquiries about Iranian lethal aid to militants in Iraq.

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ISCI's Likely Leadership Outcome

17. (C) The most likely near-term successor to Abd al-Aziz is his son Ammar, ISCI's current deputy since 2007 and an Embassy contact. Ammar has often called for closer U.S.-Iraq ties, especially cultural and economic ties as envisioned in the Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA), and has expressed unease over a perceived shifting of U.S. attention away from Iraq. Ammar makes frequent television appearances and has become more assertive during meetings. However, Ammar was only 11 years old when ISCI was founded, and some ISCI members from Abd al-Aziz's generation will chafe at following the young and more secular Ammar. During the January 2009 provincial elections, ISCI decided to run under the title "Shahid al-Mirhab" (Martyrs of the Pulpit), the name of the social and education organization run by Ammar. Shahid al-Mirhab's weaker than expected showing probably has led some to question whether ISCI can regain its political position under Ammar.

18. (C) The most likely outcome for ISCI's near-term leadership is a gradual diminution of the authority of ISCI chairman. The initial outpouring of goodwill toward Ammar in the wake of his father's death might be followed by the strong personalities within ISCI using public sermons or statements to recalibrate the party's message. Cleric Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri, Humam al-Hamoudi and Shaykh Taqi al-Mawla all are likely competitors for leadership. Former ISCI member Muhammad al-Haidari, preacher at the Khilani mosque in Baghdad and brother of the head of the Shia Endowment, might now look past his rivalry with the Hakims and seek to re-enter ISCI. Vice President Adil Abd al-Mahdi will probably use his close friendship with Ammar to remain an influential strategic guide for ISCI. As one of his last moves, Abd al-Aziz appointed Hamoudi in mid-May to lead ISCI's efforts to negotiate the UIA's revival, an acknowledgement that Hamoudi and the old guard might yet be better able than Ammar to face down ISCI's Shia rivals.

Embassy Response to Hakim's Death

¶9. (C) Hakim's funeral ceremonies will likely occur over the next three days in Najaf. Given Hakim's stature within the Shia community and in Iraq in general, the Ambassador will attend condolence ceremonies in Baghdad or Najaf. In the coming weeks, we will initiate meetings with Ammar al-Hakim and other ISCI officials to personally express our condolences and inquire about ISCI's future.

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